



# AROUND NDE

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## New Commissioner Takes the Reins at NDE



**Dr. Roger Breed**

On March 30, 2009, Dr. Roger Breed became the Commissioner of Education for the Nebraska Department of Education. Dr. Breed was offered the position by the Board after a special meeting on September 22, 2008. Since the first of the year, he juggled responsibilities as superintendent of Elkhorn Public Schools with "vacation days" spent working at NDE on transition matters. Now that he's here full-time, we took the occasion to sit down with him to learn more about the man who will guide the Department in this next chapter of our history.

### **Tell us about your background in the field of education.**

To date, I have devoted thirty-eight years to working in Nebraska public schools. I started my teaching career as a social studies teacher and basketball coach at Everett Junior High School in Lincoln. From there I taught at Lincoln Public Schools' alternative high school, went on to be assistant principal of Goodrich Junior High and then principal at

York Middle School. While I was working on my doctorate, I was the assistant director of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's (UNL) Career Planning and Placement Center. Once my doctorate was completed, I became the superintendent of Axtell Community School. After a couple of years at Axtell, I was hired by Elkhorn Public Schools as the Assistant Superintendent. Four years later, I became the superintendent at Elkhorn and held that position for just shy of 18 years. I have also served as an adjunct professor at UNK, UNO, and Peru State.

I have been involved in many statewide leadership activities such as numerous committees and boards responsible for examining issues and developing recommendations regarding state standards, assessment programs, personnel selection and certification, and other significant school policy issues. This participation includes serving as a member and current vice-chair of the Nebraska State Accreditation Committee, a member and past chair of the Executive Board of the Nebraska Council of School Administrators (NCSA), and a member and past president of the Greater Nebraska Schools Association, an organization dedicated to the needs and issues related to equalized school districts in Nebraska. In 2007, I was pleased to be recognized by NCSA as Nebraska's Superintendent of the Year. (*Cont. on p. 2.*)

**What originally attracted you to the field of education?**

I attended UNL and intended to major in journalism. As a sophomore, I enrolled in Teachers College and was involved in NUSTEP (Secondary Teacher Education Program). I met some great education professors while there. As a side note, both of my parents were teachers (my mother was a Kindergarten teacher and my father was briefly a Vocational Agriculture teacher before starting a lengthy career in insurance.

**What do you consider to be your most significant achievement to date?**

I think it would have to be participating in, and in many ways leading, the process to plan, develop the consensus support for, and pass bond issues, design/construct, and ultimately open seven school buildings that will serve school children long after I'm gone.

**How have your attitudes and beliefs about education in Nebraska changed from when you first started teaching?**

I have always liked students, schools and the schooling process. And, I have truly enjoyed all of my roles in education. My first professional job was at Everett Junior High in Lincoln, teaching seventh and eighth graders. This experience introduced me to students of poverty, who came to school without the support of two educated parents (my experience). My second teaching experience was in the Lincoln Individual Needs Learning Center (the precursor school to what is now the Bryan Alternative School in the Lincoln Public Schools). Here I worked with students who had dropped out of Lincoln high schools and been on the streets for at least one year. We established individual learning programs and worked hard to get and keep students engaged in the educational process. These two experiences helped shape my view that the schooling process must be flexible and that there is no one right way for all students. These experiences also affirmed my view

that almost all kids want to do well in school if they feel the school wants to do well by them. My two years as the superintendent of Axtell (town of 300, school district of 280, K-12) helped me fully understand the power and meaning of a small community, something we city slickers do not fully appreciate. Many of us city folks do not have a concept of community or what it means to be part of a small town where folks realize they are in this thing called life - - together, come heck or high water. My 22 years in Elkhorn allowed me to build upon my past experiences and to participate in helping a community and school district grow from a rural-based, small town school district to a rapidly growing and changing suburban area and school district.

**What attracted you to apply for the position of Commissioner?**

I felt that the NDE needed to remain a Nebraska-based, Nebraska informed institution. I further felt that my experiences in Lincoln, York, Axtell and Elkhorn, as well as my statewide contacts and relationships, would be helpful to the Department and the state education system.

**What changes do you have in store for the Department?**

The Department has great people and works hard to serve the state education system. I have no changes in mind at this time so my slate is clear except for establishing positive working relationships with the Governor, the Education Committee of the Legislature, and business, community, and education leaders throughout the state.

**You've hired Dr. Scott Swisher as your Deputy Commissioner. Tell us about him.**

Scott has experience in the Omaha Public Schools and as an elementary principal and superintendent in Hartington. He has served in statewide roles and is regarded as an enthusiastic, hard working, and well-respected educator. Scott will officially begin

work on July 1<sup>st</sup>, but will be devoting some “vacation” days to transition work between now and then.

**Will the duties of the Commissioner and Deputy remain as they have been? Are any other changes in store?**

For now the roles of the Commissioner, Deputy and Assistant(s) will stay the same. I have asked Marge Harouff to serve as the Interim Deputy until her announced retirement date of July 10. I have also appointed Brian Halstead, who has served the Department for almost twenty years, to the role of Assistant Commissioner on a permanent basis. After Scott, Brian and I have served for a period of months, we will likely reorganize the roles of the NDE administrative team.



**Dr. Scott Swisher**  
Deputy  
Commissioner-Elect



**Brian Halstead**  
Assistant  
Commissioner

**What priorities do you have for your first year as Commissioner?**

My main priorities at this time are to establish positive working relationships with NDE personnel, with the State Board Members and with our key partners including the Governor, Education Chair/Committee of the Legislature, educator groups, business groups and community groups.

**What is the one thing you most look forward to in your new position?**

I most look forward to working with the great educators in Nebraska that exist from border

to border in an effort to offer a consistently great educational opportunity for all Nebraska students.

**If you had the power to introduce a sweeping change or make something happen overnight, what would it be?**

If I could make sweeping changes, I would require (as education emperor) that all children come to school with sufficient assets to support their life success in school and beyond. Unfortunately, I see many students who fail, not because of the school or their efforts at school, but because the factors of life simply overwhelm them.

**Tell us about your family.**

I have been married to my wife Judy for 39 years. Judy is a retired math teacher who keeps her hand in teaching by tutoring and substitute teaching. We have two grown sons, Tyler (a lawyer) and Adam (a chemist/manager for Pfizer), two daughters-in-law, and most importantly four grandchildren – Cade (10), twins – Lily and Grace (2½) and Isaac (16 months). Our sons and their families live in the St. Louis area. I grew up in Lincoln and my parents and two of my three brothers still live in Lincoln.



“Tickle, tickle.” Granddaughters  
Lily And Grace Breed at play.

**You’ve said that this is a “24-7” job. What do you do with what little free time you have?**

I exercise regularly and enjoy long walks

with my wife, Judy, and my border collie, Buddy. I also enjoy container gardening with annuals.

### **What are your pet peeves?**

One of my pet peeves is people who don't recognize the privilege and honor we have to live and work in the world of children. People without a sense of humor bug me also.

### **Tell us something about yourself that most people don't know.**

I learned at one time to tie flies for fly fishing, a hobby to which I would someday like to return.

### **What is the last good book you read?**

I read all the time. Most of the time I read education journals (Ed Week, Kappan, ASBJ, etc.) for the job; for pleasure, I alternate between novels and non-fiction. The last really good novel I read was Water for Elephants by Sara Gruen. Recent non-fiction favorites were Wisdom of Our Fathers by Tim Russert and The Nine – Inside the Secret World of the Supreme Court by Jeffry Toobin.

**Thanks for spending some time helping us to get to know you. We look forward to working with you and wish you the best for a long and productive tenure at NDE.**



The red carpet is rolled out for Dr. Breed.



Dr. Harouff, Interim Deputy Commissioner, passes the torch (flashlight) to Dr. Breed.



A sign adorns the front entrance of the Department to welcome Dr. Breed.



Dr. Breed makes remarks to the staff.